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Campaign Decisions - Perception and Analysis

He never met his opponents. He neither sent nor received any written messages, electronic signals or other formal communications with Admiral Anaya or General Menendez. Yet in his recently-published memoir[1], Admiral Sandy Woodward describes a method for rationalizing campaign decisions through an extended series of implicit negotiations between military commanders engaged in desperate combat against one another.

Most instructive to the student of campaign strategy is Woodward's description of his process of analysis that resulted in the sequential series of tacit bargains that broke the enemy's will during the brief yet costly Falklands/Malvinas War. Woodward's recollections demonstrate his awareness of the direct relationship between his decisions and the options available to Anaya and Menendez and, accordingly, how those made by the Argentine sea and land campaign commanders formed Woodward's own

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[1]Woodward, Admiral Sir John, and Patrick Robinson. One Hundred Days: The Memoirs of the Falklands Battle Group Commander. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1992.

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analyses and subsequent decisions. That dynamic relationship forms the focus of this brief study which attempts to examine four critical campaign decisions, analyze their development within the context of tacit bargaining, and evaluate their contribution to victory.

This case provides an interesting example of a commander looking past his enemy's capabilities to "dealing with the enemy's intentions."[2] Its observations may be applicable to other situations requiring strategic decisions absent communications with the enemy.

There's nothing particularly unusual in the notion that a military campaign could be carried out with actions taking the place of words, where the commander's decisions are based on how the potential for such action might be perceived by his opponent. In fact, it may even be argued that that characteristic (along with violence itself) is precisely what distinguishes combat from other forms of political conflict. Not that conventional communications aren't often employed between adversaries in the conduct of war, or that diplomats don't also exploit an appreciation of semiotics to convey what they might otherwise prefer to leave unsaid, but simply that in the conduct of warfare the medium of negotiation is usually combat itself.

What makes this case interesting is Admiral Woodward's clear-headed realization of what he was about during the Falklands

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[2]Schelling, Thomas C. "Assumptions About Enemy Behavior." Analysis For Military Decisions. The RAND Corporation, 1964.

campaign - though he did not always seem to come to what, in retrospect, might appear to have been the ideal decision.

Striking, however, is the degree to which Woodward appreciated the need to force his opponent to adapt to Woodward's choices and to thereby limit his effectiveness. It's important to apply some principle of fairness, to keep a firm grasp on what information the decision-maker had at hand when he had to make his choices and that his decisions had to be based upon the likely response of his unfamiliar and imperfectly predictable opponent through the dark glass of his own perceptions.

This study's framework for critical analysis of Woodward's decisions stands on three legs: a brief description of the facts of each decision in the form of available options and outcomes, an examination of the prioritization architecture and system of evaluating the merits of each option - upon which the decision was based, and some thoughts regarding the relationship of the decision to subsequent actions and war termination. In every case, the emphasis is on the form and character of tacit negotiations between the commanders, and how the gaming aspect of their peculiar communications affected the process and the ultimate outcome.

Four campaign decisions in the Falklands War are used here for illustration and examination: the British approach to the battleground, the scheme of stationing the two British aircraft carriers, pursuit of direct engagement between the fleets, and

the selection of the British landing site. In each of these cases, three options for each side are considered for analysis.

The Approach

On Friday, April 2, 1982, Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands. The British Prime Minister having ordered a naval response, Admiral Woodward assembled such forces as were available and shaped course from Gibraltar enroute the South Atlantic. Along with logistic and enroute training concerns, the admiral reasoned that the path of approach could itself provide an important signal to those awaiting his arrival. His choices included a direct rhumbline approach: Gibraltar-Ascension Island-Falklands or one or two alternatives which would cost time yet present varying measures of uncertainty to Admiral Anaya. One, a covert easterly track, might deny Argentine observation of his force's location and progress yet cost time and fuel enroute the objective. The other indirect approach would take the British armada closer past South America on its way to the Falklands.

Time was a central concern. Hastening south to avoid the prospect of combat operations during the harsh South Atlantic winter carried an obvious priority. Steaming directly toward the objective served that requirement but failed to take advantage of the opportunity to interfere with Argentine decision-making by inserting the measure of unpredictability that a non-obvious approach provided.

On the Argentine side, three options obtained: simply to conduct surveillance of the British as they proceeded south and to act once their intentions had become clear, to conduct surveillance and attack them enroute, or to send a naval force well ahead of the British and strike at the end of the taxing three-week transit.

In the event, Woodward chose a modified direct approach which included a long southwesterly leg from Ascension which could have been construed to indicate an intention to pass close by the eastern South American coast towards Buenos Aires. Once north of the Falklands, the British battle group veered back away from the continent and continued on to their operating area east of the Falklands proper.

What significance could Admiral Anaya have gathered from observation of the diversionary leg? Clearly, he might have assumed that Woodward intended air strikes against the mainland in retaliation for the Falklands invasion, or that a challenge to the Argentine navy was being issued. Although the record does not provide analysis of his reaction to what must have been alarming news, it's fair to guess that subsequent Argentine decisions regarding the positioning of their surface fleet reflected concern of a British attack against a coastline left undefended.

On his side, Woodward wondered how his "signal" was being interpreted by Menendez at Port Stanley and by Anaya in Buenos Aires. Do they expect me to continue toward the coastline in preparation for strikes against the capital? Will they be moved

to send their aircraft carrier against me in riposte? Am I reducing my chances for mission success by diverting from direct relief of the Falklands? What does this diversion tell my opponent about my ability to complicate his strategic problem by inserting uncertainty into my intentions? Whose idea was this diversion, anyway? His, or mine? Who, at this point, owns the advantage or initiative in modifying our relationship to his own advantage, even through the simple mechanism of taking the minor but somewhat unpredictable step of adding a threatening diversionary leg to an otherwise long, straightforward transit enroute the objective? Woodward could have declined the diversionary approach and reached his objective area a few days sooner. Knowing that his position was being tracked by Argentine reconnaissance aircraft, and understanding the advantage to be accrued from even a small measure of unpredictability, he chose the extra leg. The effect on Anaya can only be inferred from his behavior: continued reconnaissance against the approaching British battle group, continued reinforcement of the newly-invested Islas Malvinas, and continued wishful thinking that war would be averted. That he ordered neither an attack enroute nor a "waiting committee" lying off the Falklands can be interpreted to represent an early concession of operational initiative.

Stationing the Force

By dawn on the first of May Argentine wishful thinking was brought to a rude end as Great Britain commenced attacks against

the occupying force. A Vulcan long-range bomber attacked Stanley Airfield from high altitude, having flown 3900 miles from Ascension to reach the target. Shortly afterwards, twelve Harriers launched from HMS HERMES and HMS INVINCIBLE announced the battle group's arrival in the form of attacks against targets on East Falkland Island. The battle was joined.

Among the many operational decisions facing Woodward, one of the most crucial concerned the stationing of his force. He reasoned that placing his destroyers and frigates alongside the enemy permitted their useful employment while exposing them to risk of loss - and that such loss could be accepted as the price of doing business. Woodward was conversely disinclined to expose his carriers to the same risk. He was forced to choose: disregard the risk and place the carriers close to the target area, keep them safely to the east yet generally within range of the islands, or to challenge the Argentines into a "do or die" culminating battle by steaming directly into the exposed waters west of the Falklands.

Since their principal weapons were the Harriers they carried, that Argentine possession of the Falkland Islands precluded any alternative bases for the Harriers, and that loss of the Harriers would leave his force incapable of achieving his principal mission, Woodward decided that he must at all cost prevent loss of the carriers. For the duration of the ensuing campaign, he kept HERMES and INVINCIBLE well out of harm's way, even

surrendering aircraft time over the target area in order to preserve his precious flight decks.

Faced with the responsibility to turn back the British presence, Anaya was forced to decide how to strike most effectively against Woodward's carriers. Full scale land-based air strikes utilizing bombs and Exocet antiship missiles promised high lethality if accurate targeting could be obtained. Submarine attacks using torpedoes offered excellent target selectivity if the British antisubmarine screen could be breached. Surface ships might be able to approach close enough to permit attacks by carrier-based bombers, ships' guns and surface-to-surface missiles.

The technical military justification for the Woodward's carrier stationing decision is simple enough. The real question, then, is how and whether that decision was perceived by the opposition and what use they were able to make of what provided a clear suggestion for a winning Argentine strategy. That the information was available is certain: Argentine air and surface (and reportedly submarine) surveillance platforms provided frequent localizing cues sufficient to disclose a consistent pattern of battle group stationing about 180 miles east of Port Stanley throughout the campaign. The British press openly excoriated Woodward for his position of safety "off South Africa" at a time when his expendable destroyers endured steady attacks from the Argentine Air Force at their exposed stations close by the

islands. Why, then, did Menendez fail to exploit Woodward's vulnerability and attempt to take out the carriers?

The answer may lie in two domains: the realm of the practical - that the task was simply too difficult and any attempts would have inevitably ended in failure; and the realm of artifice and manipulation - that in fact the carriers were very vulnerable and were not attacked only because Woodward, through his actions, tacitly convinced Anaya that the task was impossible and should not be attempted. The act of sinking the Argentine cruiser BELGRANO provided an especially convincing implicit message.

Fleet Action

Faced with the explicit political challenge represented by the British declaration of a 200-mile Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) centered on Port Stanley and the threatening presence of Woodward's battle group close to the Falklands, the Argentine commander reviewed his options. As discussed above, direct fleet action was a possibility. A campaign of hit-and-run air, submarine, and surface group attacks intended to throw off British efforts was also available for consideration. Anaya's least appealing option was to keep his ships safe from submarine attack by remaining in port while only land-based aircraft attacked the British force.

Admiral Anaya decided upon a two-pronged plan which placed the aircraft carrier VEINTECINCO DE MAYO and its escorts to the north of the British battle group with the cruiser BELGRANO and its

missile-equipped escorts approaching from the south. This simple, logical plan would have provided an excellent opportunity for the Argentine Navy to inflict unacceptable damage on Woodward's force, had it been aggressively executed.

As the three groups approached one another, Woodward's options were limited and pressing: he could, on the basis of scanty locating information, hold his ground and strike against the two Argentine groups using Harriers and ship-launched Exocets of his own; he could adopt a defensive posture and hope that his submarines could attack Anaya's ships once they had entered the TEZ; or he could retire to the east and wait for more favorable developments.

Woodward fretted as his submarines failed to gain contact with either Argentine group. The threat of surprise air attack became acute as time passed and distances narrowed.

Then the nuclear submarine HMS CONQUERER reported close contact with BELGRANO, located somewhat outside the declared TEZ. The rules of engagement(ROE) in force did not permit attacks against Argentine units operating outside the TEZ so Woodward was faced with a quandary: either to violate ROE or risk losing contact with BELGRANO as she approached to within attack range of his precious carriers.

The audacious Argentine plan forced Woodward to counter their offer of battle with a bold stroke of his own: he directed CONQUERER to attack the cruiser. The ancient ship sank quickly and took with her any Argentine hope for a major naval

engagement. It was not simply the loss of BELGRANO's combat capability that so stunned the Argentines, nor was it the loss of over eight hundred of her crew. It was Woodward's seemingly cold-hearted calculation in ordering the torpedo attack without warning and the compelling image of impotence the attack assigned to the victim that communicated so well the awful danger now facing the Argentine force. The Argentine response was to call off their still (technically) capable attack force, return that force to port for the duration of the war, and to turn instead to the use of land-based attack aircraft to take the battle to the British naval force. Woodward, not realizing the extent and import of the Argentine decision, continued to fear attacks from the Argentine surface force for several days, so real was the potential threat from their missiles, aircraft and guns.

In a sense, then, the Argentine attempt at a sea-borne attack did have an effect on Woodward's thinking and made the British force perhaps less well prepared to deal with the next phase: air-launched missile attacks against the battle group. By the time those attacks commenced, however, Woodward's previous decision regarding the stationing and protection of his carriers was well in place. The Argentine air attacks did cause the loss of considerable British initiative in subsequent operations but did not attain the intended result - the delivery of a level of destruction to the British force that would cause it to abandon the campaign.

Any loss of British initiative was serious, for the survival of the battle group was not the purpose of the operation: a decision had to be made soon as to where and when to land the force that would retake the Falklands.

San Carlos

Woodward's two decisions regarding the timing and location of the landing were asymmetric: the timing was largely determined for him by the date of arrival of the British invasion force and the approach of deteriorating winter weather. Simply put, he had to order the landing as soon as the invasion force was ready. Choosing a place to land, however, was based to a far greater extent on previous Argentine decisions and how Woodward interpreted those decisions. Three possible landing sites were available to the British force: San Carlos Bay, Lafonia Peninsula, and Teal Inlet. Each was characterized by a number of topographic and logistic considerations which made the choice between them rather moot.

In addition to the technical military factors, the landing decision relied heavily on the well-developed system of tacit communications now existing between Admiral Woodward and General Menendez. How did Menendez now interpret British air attacks? As preparatory softening-up of a potential landing site, or as nothing more than diversionary harassment? Where and for what reasons had Menendez deployed his land forces? Where did he expect the landing to take place? How could Woodward force

Menendez to commit his defenses in such a way as to permit a minimum of interference during the vulnerable period between the initial landing and the point at which the land forces could fend off the air attacks sure to follow?

General Menendez was forced to decide how best to prepare for the impending assault by considering three options: he could concentrate his force at Port Stanley and thereby concede that he could not prevent a landing everywhere, he could disperse his force and prepare to oppose landings at a few most-likely landing sites, or he could concentrate on locating the amphibious force and attack them before they could approach the beach.

Again, tacit bargaining and subterfuge provided the means for Woodward to influence Argentine behavior. Several days of naval bombardment and air attacks against "logical" landing sites coupled with ultimate selection of an unlikely site were sufficient to permit a successful landing. Close coordination between the bombardment group, special forces, the landing force and the air component exploited Argentine inattention and the landing occurred at San Carlos without opposition on 21 May. Although the Argentine Air Force delivered heavy blows against the screening force in "Bomb Alley" for several days, the landing was a success and would lead to the recovery of the islands within a few weeks. Not without further cost, not without avoidable British mistakes, but from the establishment of the beachhead the strategic victory was won. After 21 May there passed only one message between the opposing commanders - the

time and location of the surrender ceremony. The opportunity and requirement for tacit negotiations had passed with the end of hostilities.

Final Thoughts

The four campaign decisions examined here, although representative, certainly can't convey the full scope of challenges imposed on the commander. They do illustrate, however, part of the decision-making process Admiral Woodward employed in the South Atlantic campaign. That he was successful demonstrates the value of making operational and strategic decisions by:

- understanding the opponent's capabilities,
- considering his options and one's own,
- estimating how artful selection of one's own options can be used to influence the opponent's decisions,
- examining likely outcomes resulting from the intersection of both sides' options,
- and, by prioritizing those outcomes from both perspectives and evaluating the effects of timing, risk, and mutual adaptation, selecting rational and well-considered courses of action.

In the end, the British victory was due in no small measure to Admiral Woodward's ability to think his way past the obvious in making strategic campaign decisions. He repeatedly forced his opponents to behave in ways that limited Argentine operational opportunities and sustained British strategic initiative: he

broke their will. He employed surprise, flexibility and analysis of enemy intentions to achieve victory through skilful exercise of serial tacit negotiation rather than overwhelming military superiority. Future campaign commanders will do well to emulate the "Woodward method" of making campaign decisions by negotiating with the enemy.